

Visions That Do Not Reproduce Another Nightmare

Ashis Nandy*
Study of Developing Societies
India

ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

Alternative visions and interpretations of the global soul/mind are crucial if we wish to engage in global action that does not reproduce yet another nightmare.

Most pressing is moving away from the discourse of universalism, as the dominant strand of universalism is grounded in a European worldview that accepts as absolute the superiority of the human, the masculine, the adult, the historical and the modern/progressive over the non-human/sub-human, the feminine, the child, the ahistorical and the traditional/savage. Thus in present times, the dream of 'one world' has become a nightmare and a threat to the survival of non-modern/western cultures.

It portends a homogenised, hierarchised world that is sharply categorised – into the modern and the primitive, the secular and the non-secular, the scientific and the unscientific, the normal and the abnormal, the developed and the underdeveloped, the vanguard and the led, the liberated and the salvable.

At the 1900 Paris Exhibition, the world's leading scientists were asked to make predictions for the 20th century. What will be the highest speed human beings will achieve? Two hundred and fifty miles an hour, they said. Asked whether radio or the electric bulb would become household fixtures, the consensus was that they would not become normal household fixtures.

Asked about rockets, these scientists said they would be in the sphere of science fiction in the 20th century.

The lesson of the survey is that specialist knowledge perhaps does not ensure an adequate break with the past to predict satisfactorily.

ARTISTS AND THE FUTURE

The only person who came close to predicting the future was the novelist, Jules Verne. That says something about human imagination and the need to allow the imagination not to become burdened or overloaded with existing knowledge from existing frameworks of analysis. Creative artists have the freedom to explore. They will be wrong most of the time. They are not taken seriously, but this gives them access to collective soul, tacit knowledge. Once in a while they succeed remarkably well.

I propose therefore that one task of futures studies is to make such imaginative leaps, not because you will be right, but because you will learn to take these imaginary trips and will expand and enhance human selfhood by that and in the long run that might give you better access to human futures.

A UNESCO publication in 1980 discussed the growth of science and technology in the next 35 years. The predictions were very optimistic for science and technology. For example, their data showed that if the

* Ashis Nandy is an editorial board member of the Journal of Futures Studies, Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, India and author of numerous books on postcolonialism.

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then prevailing rate of science and technology continued, the total weight of all scientific and technological papers and books would overtake the total weight of the earth. Also the expenditure on science and technology: if the growth rates were projected into the future, the total expenditure would overtake the total budget of all the countries of the globe put together. And finally, if the growth rate of science and technology continued, the total number of scientists and technologists in the world would overtake the total number of human beings on earth.

All three are absurd and none of them happened of course, but it shows that linear projections can take us only some distance....

NEGATIONS OF FUTURES STUDIES

Futures studies, all futures studies, begin with two negations.

1. Negation of the primary assumption of the person who has set the tone of the economic world in which we live, John Maynard Keynes. He said, more or less, that in the long run we are all dead. Futures studies is the negation of this presumption that in the long run we are all dead. Futures studies presumes that we live and, with our children and grandchildren, we live in communities and cultures, that we continue to live. We might not physically be there but something of ourselves is passed on to the coming generations and this is the base on which futures studies will have to work. That matter of trust in the future, that belief we can do something for it, matters.
2. Negation No.2 is the famous saying of W.C. Fields, who was once asked in the context of the environmental crisis, 'what do you think of the future?'. He replied: 'Why should I think of the future? What has the future done for me?' Futures studies is a negation of this, too, because it invites you to do something for the future, not because

the future has done something for you but for the sake of doing something for the future and perhaps in the process... to get a minor sense of fulfillment that you have done something for the future, that you have left something which will have a long term effect on the future of humankind, that will make things better for the 95 per cent of humankind who have never moved out of the village where they were born, or the 30 per cent who live below the line of \$1 per day, or the 21 per cent who walk on average two and a half miles per day to get their drinking water. That also is part of the responsibility of students of the future.

Professor Kaku (in his presentation at the Tamkang Conference on the Global Soul, Global Mind, Global Action) believes that the idea of running water has disappeared, become invisible. I hope that some of us will be concerned with another vision of the world where this will matter.

The projections and predictions of science need to be balanced by other ways of knowing. They need to be subject to human interventions, human disruptions.

In the 1930s I read a paper by a scientist in a publication on bioethics. Suppose a person who dies is brain dead but otherwise the body is healthy – is it possible to use that and is it something we should do? He makes the presumption that there would be a consensus that this should not be done.

FINDING THE LIMITS TO THE FUTURE

We should set limits to our innovation, our ingenuity and our technological expertise. I think it is the responsibility of future studies to find out what these limits should be. The truth of the past is a construction. All history ultimately is a construction, but over the last 150 years, history is increasingly becoming a professional enterprise. History is being frozen. As it is frozen we become more and more what the

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19th century social observers said we would be – products of history. We became more and more captives of history, because the domain of history has expanded. It is freezing the past. This is perhaps particularly true of the modern world and particularly that part of the modern world we call west.

History has other roles in the majority world. Western history is only one modest way of constructing the past. In this part of the world we construct our past in various ways – through epics, myths, legends. Grandparents and parents share memories. This keeps the past open. Also in many civilisations in this part of the world, Utopias are not in the future but in the past. In China and India, for example, the kind of function Utopias play in western civilisations are not the only way Utopias can influence contemporary culture, contemporary life. It also creates policy influences because constructions of the past, going back to the past, becomes a form of politicism of the present. The domain of history is expanding.

If you look at all future constructions as an intervention in the contemporary, a critique of the contemporary, then we are in a different kind of game. Then future design becomes an exploration of what will happen in the future, of what we think might happen and what that way of thinking in the future means in the present. As important as Utopias are Dystopias. In the last 100 years our Dystopias have influenced us more than our Utopias. There is more chance of establishing human agreement on what we do not want than on positive virtues. This is not a loss. In some fundamental sense this is one of our strengths. What will happen is a matter future generations will decide. It will be decided democratically by millions of people because the choices are not likely to rest on what is true or false but on what is moral, immoral, aesthetic.

So the best we can do is extend areas of choice, give future generations the possibility to choose. That choice may not be guided by the best of scientific knowledge or the best available university knowledge in any sphere of life. We have to be humble to accept that the best possible choices in political and economic mat-

ters are decided in the parliament, not in the classrooms of a university. Similarly when it comes to human futures we must be reconciled to the fact that millions must have their choice. In fact it is our duty to ensure that those who do not have a choice get a voice and can participate in the decision-making.

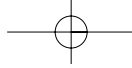
One of the problems of disciplinary knowledge is that the universities prevail... the word university itself was supposed to take account not only of the knowledge available in universities but also take into account other kinds of knowledge... to turn the university into a forum where different streams of knowledge can interact. That was the job of the university. It is my feeling that universities are increasingly becoming university based, learning from their own knowledge and that of other universities and that this search for respectability is increasingly narrowing the basis of human knowledge.

EXPERTISE AND DEMOCRACY

We do not make great progress by strangling other systems of knowledge and considering them obsolete or redundant. I do think there is increasingly a tendency to banish to history systems of knowledge which are strong, which are uncomfortable and which do not have the imprint of a university system. I hope that futures studies, being still less university bound, still less constrained by the respectability that universities seek, will be more open to this multiplicity of knowledge systems and become a moral voice in the world in which we live and hopefully in the world in which our children will live. Can there be a dialogue between expertise and democracy? I consider all futures studies to be a game of design: When you multiply the number of designs you multiply your choices.

Correspondence

Ashis Nandy
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies,
29 Rajpur Road Delhi 110 054, India.
Telephone: 91 (11) 394 2199, 395 1190
397 1151



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Res: 435 6280 ; Fax: 91 (11) 394 3450
ashisnandy@gmail.com

